

The Desert Fathers

IF IDEAS HAVE HABITATS in which they originate and prosper, then the desert edge might be called the home of Western thought. Historically this is common knowledge, for the peoples of the dry landscapes of Egypt, Sumer, Assyria, Palestine, and the Eastern European and Eurasian borders of the Mediterranean Sea fashioned many of the concepts that define Occidental civilization.

To understand this aridity of culture we must stand apart from the conventions of history, even while using the record of the past, for the idea of history is itself a Western invention whose central theme is the rejection of habitat. It formulates experience outside of nature and tends to reduce place to location. To it, the plains and passes of the desert fringe are only a stage upon which the human drama is enacted. History conceives the past mainly in terms of biography and nations. It seeks causality in the conscious, spiritual, ambitious character of men and memorializes them in writing.¹

The desert is a powerful, unique sensorium. Silence and emptiness are the ambiguous descriptions of sounds and landforms. The desert is at once a place of sensory deprivation and awesome overload—too little life, too much heat, too little water, too much sky. Its cool shadows offer “thermal delight,” and yet the desert evokes the terrors of the inferno.²

Its distance and scale, the sweep between horizons and the loftiness of stars, its winds and mirages, its hidden life and conspicuous shapes seem at once to dwarf and to emphasize the human figure. Its sensory impact is profoundly stimulating and disturbing, a massive shock to the human limbic system—the neural basis of emotional response—which seems to demand some logic or interpretation.

Between the senses and the logic is perception—that is, the biopsychological screening devices, filters, combined forces of inherent tendency and individual experience that direct attention and focus possibilities. Thus, what the desert means is preceded by preconscious selection of what is seen and how it is seen. Myriad qualities of the desert beg for interpretation: the firmness of outline; the linearity of horizon and movement; the separateness of things and their static, fixed quality as though made by some absent artisan; the way light and dark, sky and earth, life and death insist on contrast and duality; the ephemerality of creatures and transience of man; the flickering vitality of things distant, such as the planets; things unseen but heard, opposed to the frozen immobility of stone. These are some of the preconscious pointers toward interpretation.

Although it seems inimical to human life, the desert—the great dry belts that straddle the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn—is the home of the world's civilizations. At the waterholes and along the rivers of the arid subtropics of Asia, Africa, and Europe where the three continents join, history began—not in the sandy desert proper, but at its edges. These margins are not desert habitats proper, but ecological *ecotones*. They include the spare shrub communities at the fringe of sandy plains or stony plateaus; the patches of grassland on slightly moister slopes; traces of savanna; the evergreen dry forest of the mountain islands; the verdant park and wetlands of the oases and river margins proper; and the derelict phases

of all such vegetative communities degenerating toward barren rock as a result of climatic change and human abuse.

It was never the occupation of desert that mattered, but its isolating effects. It began with dramatic suddenness at the edges of valleys where cultivation and settlement leave off, always reminding farmers and their urban cousins of the separation of fertility and barrenness. The desert of the Near East was once the home of wild animals, barbarian nomads, and mounted invaders from the east and north, with whom settled peoples also engaged in commerce.

Village, town, and city life in the great valleys, as understood from the archaeological record, was a stew of seventy centuries of turmoil and havoc as well as building and growth. Recurring disasters are evident in their litter, often including the downfall of the great theocratic cities. Their ruins, numbering more than a hundred, are among the great spectacles of the earth. City after city was built upon the decimated foundations of its predecessors. Today scores of tiny villages squat on the shattered wreckage of centers that once contained many thousands of inhabitants. The pattern of expansion and collapse emerging from the excavations of these ruins is one of rising power and prosperity followed by environmental deterioration and social catastrophe, the fateful tides of powerful theocracies made vulnerable by their own success.

The cycle typically began with the concentration of authority and organization expressed in warlike expansion, territoriality, and the engineering of water supplies and irrigation. The amount of productive soil was increased by the carefully managed distribution of water. Gradually irrigation became extended complex hydraulic systems. As the population exceeded its available resources, emigrants went upstream on the heels of timber cutters and charcoal makers, many settling as stockkeepers in the watersheds of the tribu-

taries of mainstreams like the Tigris and Euphrates. Over the years, their livestock increased and denuded and trampled the slopes, destroying their vegetative cover and soil. The land lost its water-retaining capacity, increasing the runoff after rains and reducing the groundwater supplies in springs and wells. The seasonal variation in water supply was exaggerated by this flooding and scarcity. Silt threatened to clog the impoundments and the miles of intricate water-feeder systems upon which the agriculture depended.³

Cultivation, once it reached the limits of tillable land, was intensified. Crop specialization, control of weeds and pests, and increased intensity of demand on the soil set the stage for periodic outbreaks of crop diseases and invasions of pests and parasites whose wild foods were gone. Nutrient-element deficiencies and soil salination also helped set the stage for debacle.

As chiefdoms were swallowed by kingdoms and kingdoms confronted other kingdoms, defense put heavy demands on manpower, straining the bureaucratic management of the land. The semi-isolation of the great city-states converted the whole region into a giant experiment in communicable human diseases, so that, in spite of his resistance to contaminated food and water, to local strains of bacteria, viruses, nematodes, and flatworms, the citizen of such a state became vulnerable to new forms of diseases brought by traders and invaders.

Thus emerged the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: conscription, enslavement, famine, and disease.⁴ Cataclysms of whatever kind were followed by hydraulic failure and mud deposits so suffocating that neither conquerors nor stragglers could easily renew the buried waterworks that had taken decades or even centuries to build. Eventually a new city would emerge, a cult and power center of the district. Its inhabitants, like their predecessors, would seek the ritual pro-

tection of their gods, whose connection with the earth and its seasons entailed a mythology of the soil and its autochthonous forces, of the springs and streams, the weather, and the secrets of germination. They would try harder to harmonize their society with the powers of nature. But they too would fail.⁵

Since the tempo of this cycle of catastrophe and renewal was in terms of many lifetimes, it was probably more or less invisible to those who lived it. A record-keeping observer, an interested hovering alien, however, might see the futility and illusory security even though he might not recognize its ecological aspects. Most desert tribesmen were disengaged, but they were not so analytic or so interested. Another watcher from the desert was the self-styled outcast. By self-definition the Hebrews were the "outsiders." Although they adopted a nomadic style, the Hebrews were never true outsiders and contemptuous of the city in the manner of Arab nomads. Hangers-on at the fringe, mixing scorn and yearning, the little tribes of placeless people perceived with keen and biting insight the folly of the great pagan theocracies that worshipped the wrong gods.

On the most ambitious scale in the history of the world, the ancestors of the Old Testament made virtue of their homelessness. They struck a gold vein of moral analysis by assimilating certain themes of transience from genuine nomads while rejecting their fatalism. In a Semitic storm god they found a traveling deity who was everywhere and therefore not bound by location. Owning nothing, they created a theology of contingent divinity, and heroic escape.

The Hebrews discovered and occupied a force field of human relations that has been one of the most distinctive features of the Near and Middle East from the time of the earliest agriculture: the gap between pastoralist and farmer. The farmer was economically and politically allied with the

city. The domestication of plants and animals led to a Neolithic dialectic, a split in husbandry between pastorality and tillage. This Cain and Abel motif is deep in the blood of Western origins. It is fundamental to the ideological psychology of "us" against "them" that the desert seemed always to echo in its physical contrasts.

Although basically economic, the dialectic resonated with other dualities. What to their ancestral hunter-gatherers had been a polar equilibrium whereby men hunted and women gathered was sundered into masculinist and patriarchal societies of animal breeders on the one hand and Great Mother-worshiping, plant-tending cultivators of the soil on the other.

City and country were not then the symbols of opposition, but allies against the wandering peoples of the desert. The mythology of the ancient city-states was profoundly imbued with feminine principles and dominated by pantheons of powerful goddesses. Central to religion were the cosmic cycle of life, the sacredness of soil and water, the spirituality of particular places, and reverence for seasonal rhythms and harmonies of growth and decay, birth and death. These values were shared by the craftsmen, tradesmen, bureaucrats, and others of the city, centered there in a temple priesthood.

Pastoralists have traditionally shown distaste for a life of manure shoveling, mucky sluice reaming, and the drudgery and passivity of tending and waiting. To this adopted attitude the critical and analytic Hebrew added a revulsion for the heterodoxy of the city's foreign traffic, with its bastardizing, accommodating, and polluting of religion and invidious pursuit of vanity and money. It seemed apparent to the Hebrew prophets that false gods, wantonness, and materialism destined all such centers to destruction. True pastoralists might have agreed, turned their backs and gone their way, but the Hebrews watched and learned from the crack in the dialectical world. Outside the city gates, self-exiled, deriding those in-

side, sharpening new powerful weapons of objective analysis, they formulated a *via negativa*. The inevitable catastrophes that had left ruins in every direction since the beginnings of civilization testified to an inevitable providential nemesis. God was just, as well as distant from all this ritual elaboration and collaboration between men and the soil. It was not any particular Mesopotamian myth that was wrong; it was myth itself.

So the Hebrews did not choose pastoral myths, although they incorporated pastoral style: patriarchal authoritarianism, the principle of mobility, durability, frugality, a penchant for abstraction and distancing, a conscious disengagement. The giver and maker and destroyer would topple all walls and priests and kings at times and by means of his own choosing, not as the manifestation of the outraged divinity incarnate in things, but as an unknowable master outside of the creation. The occasion of all his acts would escape prediction and cyclic formats; his means would be his own: flood, famine, plague, invasion. The spectacular pattern of ruins around them told nothing of the when and how of calamity. Nothing about ordinary experience could inform one about such a god.

The Hebraic ideal was an extraordinary ambition: self-styled exiles, fugitives, wanderers, a community of alienated souls who disavowed both the substance and form of the bonding ties by which men had acknowledged kinship with earth and tribe from the dawn of consciousness and which they had given form in the exemplary and metaphorical model of myth. The ancient notion of the multiplicity of truth, of hidden spirit in all things; the mystic simultaneity of past, present, and future; the credence in spoken, sung, carved, drawn, or danced affirmation of the cohesion of all things; the reading of nature as the divine language: all were seen as illusory in the eyes of the chosen prophets and chosen people.

The Hebrews understood that, however comprehensible

natural events might be in their own right, they were meaningless in any cosmic sense. While the world was still to be revered as belonging to Him, it was to be understood that He did not regularly speak through the mysteries of birth, growth, death, the beauty and variety of life, the mutual ties among natural and social forms, or by means of incarnate, numinous hierophantic objects.

The Hebrews invented a special myth that denied the message of regularity and causal interconnectedness that had been the stuff of pagan myth. The human psyche was still to be nurtured with stories—not accounts of analogical beginnings uniting present and past, but of origins actually distant in time; not familiar oral recitations or rhetorical episodes of an epic, but quotations from the written word; not affirming a methectic, but rather a cathartic world where estrangement was the condition of all men. Just as the ancient Hebrew lived in the crevice of the Neolithic split, Occidental men would come to see themselves as neither wholly spiritual nor wholly natural, as fragmented rather than plural in nature.

The new antimythological myth was history. Psychologically it served as all myths do: as a story of the past that explains origins, establishes exemplary models of behavior, and provides the conventions of a particular group. Yet it was psychologically dysfunctional in order to sustain the ideal of estrangement. Its most revolutionary aspect was its repudiation of the cyclic pattern of events, its insistence on the truly linear flow of time, and its pursuit of its own abstract, self-confirming truth as opposed to indicators and signs in the concrete world.

Because historical events were unique, they were not analogous to the body, family, or natural processes. They were interpreted by envoys, through words written rather than spoken, proclamations tinged with strangeness, a kerygmatic, or preaching and prophetic, form. The evangelical assertion

of the new Word was not intended to make man fit into the world, but to verify his isolation and emphasize the unpredictability and disjunction of experience.⁶ Where traditional myths had been part of a great man-culture-nature-divine cybernetics, the new myth extolled the mystery of God's purpose and the discontinuity of events.

Even its linear pattern gave minimal form. Unlike the cosmological matrices of Neolithic culture, historical progression was at best a broken point-to-point sequence, full of random turns, like literary fiction. In contrast to the satisfactions of a universal harmony, it had only a lean and bare claim that things happened, but expressed little of their "whatness." It was conducive to a skepticism previously unknown. It favored a new attitude of self-scrutiny and uprooted the temptation to close with the visible world or to accept it as an expression of divinity. Life was a sensuous snare, alluring with intimations of a centered reality on earth, full of spurious signs of purpose. The doubting, sometimes mocking, rummaging, questioning attitude toward the world was extended also to a new inward scrutiny. It would reveal the artificiality of all culture and the selfishness of human motives, not only the self-delusion in all explanation, but the frailty of criticism itself.

To observe that this renovation of consciousness took place at the edge of the desert is not to say that it was caused by the desert. Perhaps it is not possible to separate causes and evidence at the level of preconscious perception. Such a consciousness might include attention habitually directed to the sky, the relative insignificance of all things organic, the sense of hidden, invisible, unknowable power that seems more akin to the wind than to concrete things. Waiting, silence, emptiness, and nothingness seem to imprint themselves on the concept of truth, self, ultimate states. In general, none of the great world religions is life affirming. They all seem to dislo-

TWO VIEWS OF LIFE:

Myth

The
Nature
of Life
—

Eternal and recurring patterns, to which fertility and fatality are crucial, hence death is positive and recyclic. Time is synchronous: the past and future are enfolded in the present. Metamorphosis is central but oriented to stability rather than change. Nothing is fortuit-

ous. The principles of totality, predictability and regularity are important. Nature and culture are in sacred symbiosis; alien cultural systems are merely different expressions of that same embeddedness. Man is at home in the world.

The
Earth
and the
Cosmos
—

God takes multiple forms and the sacred appears in all areas of life. Nature has many clues to divinity, and there also exists a culture-divinity continuum. God embodies institutions, and in them shrines, forms, images and art are

central. Life reanimates a larger cosmographic scheme. Man participates in this according to an epigenetic level of responsibility. Terrain forms, graves, and other sacred places reflect telluric and autochthonous forces.

The
Basis of
Knowing
—

All men possess an oral preunderstanding, an intuition extending from their own bodies. Mnemonic thought is applied to an analyzable world in an avidity for parallels, ritually enacted and celebrated. Science is concrete, enlarging meaning; nature offers clues to logos. Binary speculation and sys-

tems of difference are fundamental. Metaphor is the mode of divine access; forms are metaphors of powers. Myth is inseparable from ideology and morality. The record is mythopoetic, oral and musical. Estrangement of the individual is only an interval in an integrative rite.

cate and abstract *as though* taking some sign from the insignificance of life in the overwhelming geometry of mineral and astronomical forces around them. "The desert," says Herbert Schneidau in his *Sacred Discontent*, was "the concrete image of transcendence" appropriate to an unknowable God, though not his home—something "wholly other," a place of contrasting, negating oppositions.⁷

History

Emphasis is on the diachronicity and linear change in time. The world is more provisional, contingent and even random in its patterns. The purpose of life is not evident in nature, so that nature and culture are either opposed or categorized as science and history. Strangeness, estrangement and

fragmentation are characteristic. Doctrines and cults rise and fall; other cultures are mocked as erroneous. Masculine and feminine seem to be opposing. Society sees itself as nomadic, pastoral and patriarchal. The causes and purposes of things are not inherent in them.

The Nature of Life

God is apart from the world and institutions, including art and culture. God is arbitrarily unlocalized and his actions are intrusive, unexpected interruptions. Events are linked in disparate strata of time.

God is not in nature, nor is truth multiple. Guilt and a sense of deserved disaster are part of the "thouness" of history. Myth is seen as a shield from the truth.

The Earth and the Cosmos

Understanding is dialectical, Platonic or ideological. God gives messages to chosen spokesmen, and they are not repeated. Kinship is less important than chosenness. Meaning comes from prophecy or dramatic, broken, probing, or literary interpretation. Metaphor

and ritual and art are peripheral. All meaning is precarious and unique. "The beginning" has literal rather than homological significance. Personal effects are skepticism, alienation, and self-analysis.

The Basis of Knowing

*Based on
Herbert
Schneidau,
*Sacred
Discontent*,

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Its emptiness, as Aldous Huxley observed, is conducive to concentration, hallucination, sensory deprivation, spiritual exaltation, madness, and death.⁸ Its desolation is the vestment of those who want no home on earth and find a solacing humility in their own nothingness and liberation from the body. For some, the desert quest is to resolve discontinuity and seek an ultimate unity. For the Egyptians, along the pre-

dictable Nile, stability, symmetry, and coherence ruled the cosmos. For the Hebrew fathers, however, there was no after-life, no access to God beyond prayer, and no intrinsic order on earth.

History is a collective memory of the past which denies the telluric dimension of place. History was the only way to keep myth while holding that the desert was no more than a stage.⁹ Eventually its authoritarian, masculinist, ascetic ideology would spread into the cities themselves, defeating the feminine mysteries associated with riverine and oasis agriculture, a victory for transcendence over the natural and indigenous.

Though important to the roots of Western spiritual life, the desert for the Hebrews was not valued as a place. It was a vacuum, idealized as a state of disengagement and alienation, a symbol of the condition of the human spirit. Its physiological potency for visionary ecstasy is evident in the lives of holy men, from the prebiblical patriarchs to Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and thousands of pilgrims, hermits, monks, and their followers.¹⁰

This purist or puritan heritage ranges throughout Western religious inspiration, an idealism constantly threatened by the telluric powers of heathen cults, as irrepressible as weeds. However much seasonal festival and mythic intuition the Jew and Christian clung to in their daily lives, the dominant thrust of the West was, at bottom, estrangement and abstraction.¹¹

Perhaps something of the same can be said for monotheism itself. As theory, it persists with the capacity to outlive and undercut liturgical practices. Like the demythologized world, a one-God cosmos may be beyond the sustained capacity of the normal individual. "The creed of Sinai tore up the human psyche by its most ancient roots," writes George Steiner. God became as "blank as the desert air," and "the Judaic summons to perfection" was so impossible as to be a "blackmail of transcendence."¹² Steiner attempts to account for the perse-

cution of the Jew and the Holocaust as examples of the periodic outbursts of revenge against the originators of monotheism.

What is it about human psychology that finds monotheism intolerable? David Miller believes that polytheistic religious experience means being gripped by a story in which the diversity of the many characters is "the symbolic expression of a lively process." The gods and goddesses "teach us an acceptance of the variousness of ourselves and others." The monotheistic search for a single sense of identity makes us feel guilty for not getting it all together, which is impossible in a plural universe. Thinking is polytheistic, "a reality in which truth and falsity, life and death, beauty and ugliness, good and evil are forever and inextricably mixed together." The powers and forces are dramatically revealed in an acceptable way. The story form keeps what James Hillman calls "the feeling function" alive, harmonizing the "in here" with the "out there."¹³

If he cannot find evidence for a single center in a diverse world, the monotheist feels lost, experiences a disconnectedness, and senses the "death of God," which is to say, the deadness of abstraction. Belief divorced from tangible support is tiring, dull, out of touch. Theology becomes "irrelevant to faith and philosophy irrelevant to everything." Miller concludes that monotheism socially becomes fascism, imperialism, or capitalism; philosophically is unmetaphorical, unambiguous, and dichotomous; and psychologically is rigid, fixed, and linear.

Miller's polytheism in the service of a lively narrative contains not simply a heterogeneous collection of gods, but a sequence of "worlds of being and meaning in which my personal life participates." These are not merely reflected aspects of the psyche, but the means by which thought is divinized and the earth sacralized, modeling not a one-and-many

but a multivalenced world. History, however plural, is not concerned with multiple bases of an ongoing creativity or the spiritual significance of concrete diversity, but with an account of events subordinated to a single divinity. It is, says Miller, inadequate as an explanation for the way our experience actually feels; it does not link up coherently. Out of our desperation we grasp at any center that gives pattern and meaning. Ideology is born: dialectic belief, religious or secular, that fills a vacuum in the absence of religious enculturation based on lifelong immersion, with its preunderstanding continuously confirmed by sensory experience and the logic of natural relationships.

Ideology, according to Louis J. Halle, is ultimately defined as the "us against them" mentality.¹⁴ It is the expression, often social, of an implacable and irrational dualism. It is especially powerful in desert lands because the desert seems to confirm a law of oppositions to the senses, despite ideology's own scorn for such natural reference. The "cradle of civilization" is also the cradle of fanatic ideology—witness the interminable wars, large and small, that boil across its deserts. The ideologist pursues not only an idea to live by but to die and kill for, horribly distorting juvenile loyalty to kin and adolescent conformity and idealism. Perhaps this is the meaning of Kenneth Rexroth's snort that "the entire Judeo-Christian-Muslim period in human history has been an episode of unparalleled perceived and social psychosis and international barbarity."¹⁵

The logic that blames the Hebrews who invented monotheism for all its effects is, of course, unreasonable. The Christians, the Persian cults, the Platonic-Aristotelian Greeks, and the Dark Ages of Europe worked the idea toward its bitter ends. At first, the payoff of the Hebrew prophetic tradition, like that of all minority extremists, had been security, in spite of the felt impotence. It required centuries of devoted effort

to realize the either/or possibilities of monotheism, and the desert fringes as its appropriate setting. Paradise before the Fall, Paul's rapture, and the celestial realm all became interchangeable, as opposed to the real world, the desert, which represented sin, according to Basil (d. 379) and Gregory (d. 390). Persian duality helped the Christians transform all ambiguity into opposition instead of metaphor. The efforts of religious energy to reanimate the cosmos merely had the effect thereafter of creating sides, populated with demons and devils on one hand and saints and angels on the other. Augustine saw the desert itself as a war. Animals represented evil. The anchorites, like their modern fundamentalist heirs, were eager to fight devils "in the freedom of the vast wilderness," according to John Cassian (d. 435), in order "to find that life which can be compared to the bliss of angels." The hermit-animal traditions, involving Jerome (d. 420) and John the Baptist, meant subduing that ferocity which was supposed to have resulted from the Fall.

As the Testaments went northwest into Europe, so did the desert. Internalized after a thousand years, it became a necessary adjunct to evangelical desacralizing of place and to the demythologizing of the pagan tribes of the north. The concept of the wilderness became for the West the umbrella beneath which the divine discontent of the desert and the gothic fears of the northern forest could be lumped.¹⁶ Christian evangelism would invent such sweeping condemnations of nature as the Christians progressed from a rural minority toward urban power and urban thinking.

The relationship of the desert environment to the Western myth of history, to monotheism and to ideology seems to invoke a debate about environmental determinism, but such a debate is no longer possible, for it was grounded in the defunct idea of the early twentieth Century that genetical inheritance and the experience of the individual were oppos-

ing or competing forces, that the history of culture had something to do with escape from instinct and nature. The real difficulty with the discussion of the relationship of history to place is that the question is framed in an historical mode which has already decided the issue. History is inimical to compliance with nature, having arisen in a tragic perspective of man against nature, or nature as neutral. Using nature as a parable of politics, it sees all events in ideological texts.¹⁷ Determinism is itself a linear, causal concept, an historical rather than cybernetic way of thinking. It is as though it were invented in order to overstate the role of natural control in human matters, which are then seen, in reaction, as matters of choice, chance or supernatural intervention.

The Hebrew inventors of history did perceive accurately: the earth gods did not save the Sumerians from recurring disaster. Why now should we therefore find their transcendental vision any more at fault than that of the cybernetic, mythic peoples? Certainly not directly on ecological grounds. A score of Neolithic cultures decimated the ecosystems they occupied in spite of their attunement to the seasons, to the auguries of plants and animals, and to their rituals of soil and place. It is ontogeny rather than ecology of which we must speak.

What the desert fathers—in the form of history, Hebrews, patriarchs and monotheists—did to the ontogeny of the person must be seen in the context of the swaths already cut by agriculture. Those were in the psychological debilitations of diminished maternal care in large families and in the loss of wildness and otherness from the juvenile's world. The desert fathers, like their Arabic, pastoral models, scourged adolescence. They could amputate and cauterize pubertal epigenesis because they would further transform the relationship of the infant to its mother.

Having taken the desert vacancy as its sensorium and the

nomadic pastoralist Arabs as paradigmatic fathers, the Hebrews and their spiritual cousins could not have escaped the consequences. For example, the price of patriarchy is that it "denies to the woman and the child any weight, any autonomy, and any reality. The only serious world is that of the adult male. . . . It is the function of social customs and rites which surround birth, weaning, circumcision, excision—all forms of passage, in short—to prolong this fact, to accentuate it, to acknowledge it—or rather, on the contrary, to conjure it away, to liquidate it, and to make all traces of it disappear. . . . The world of mothers will be buried in the depths of an idealized past, and enveloped in fantasies. . . . This is what permits the unmasking of nature's mysteries and the decoding of her signs, as well as the annulment of the prohibitions which cover nature," says A. Bouhdiba on Arab-Muslim society.¹⁸

Landscapes, in such an abstract world, tend to become symbols of ideas. George Williams has traced out the transformation of "wilderness" and "paradise" into states of mind. The Puritans, especially the Protestants, made much of the idea of paradise. The word itself comes from the Persian for "garden" and is a forerunner of the idea of utopia. It has been interpreted as a Muslim expression of a land of "instinctual gratification" dominated by the pleasure principle.¹⁹ For the Christians, its ambiguity works its way into the very center of the idea of the Fall, in which their scorn for sensual gratification, as experienced by Adam, marks their swing toward repression. But the ambiguity about paradise was there long before the first Christian.

The over-mothered infant in patriarchal society and, among boys, their severance from the world of women exploits the theorizing openness of the adolescent. In him the dream of paradise will be nourished by that loss and will feed his fantasies and his hopes for the future. Its emotional inten-

sity will also heat the opposite of paradise, the wilderness. Yet the two, in their polarity, have analogous points in purity and remoteness, in their romantic perfection. The quality of this remote yet yearned-for purity is native to the state of adolescence itself, and bears to adolescence a functional psychological role.

Peter Blos, Norman Kiehl, Anna Freud, Erik Erikson, and many others have described the characteristic subjectivity and behavior of adolescence. Perhaps the most peculiar of these features is a regression to certain infantile traits: playfulness with sound making and word meanings; body sensibilities and self-consciousness; "acting out" of feelings and emotions; extreme variability and instability of moods; a reinvigorated fraternal and paternal attachment; and fantasies of power and heroics. In addition, the adolescent typically is preoccupied with larger questions: the meaning and purpose of life; concepts of infinity, space, time, and God; and the ideal human relationship and community. Piaget speaks of this as a formal or abstract level; others call it symbolic thought.

Much of this is familiar and common knowledge. Yet, in a historical-existentialist society the right questions may not be asked. Adolescent behavior can be made to seem a response to the circumstances in which a youth finds himself: the uncertainty and choices faced by the subadult; the somewhat irresponsible status granted him by adults; and the ambivalent experience of being between childhood and maturity, like a melon not quite ripe.

In the light of human evolution, however, the adolescent traits can be seen not only as symptoms of a growth spurt or as adjustments to social limbo, but as a highly specialized process of emergence. In small-group, tribal societies, adolescence is perceived as a gestation followed by the birth of the adult. The whole group is intimately involved in this process. Mircea Eliade, the eminent scholar of comparative religions,

has described its basic format, even though its details vary among different societies: the ceremonial death of the child, the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, the new capacity to endure and suffer, rites of rebirth in initiation, and a vision quest. Central to these administrations is attention to his indigenous desire for cosmic understanding and profound devotion.²⁰ Because his comprehension of the religious significance and origins of life can only be grasped metaphorically, the language of these ultimate matters is mythopoetic, based on metaphors from concrete experience, especially, says Joseph Campbell, the "imprints of infancy."

The adolescent becomes psychologically infantlike on his own in order to be reborn culturally as an adult. Each of the infantile behaviors lends itself in some appropriate way to this transition. The so-called primary thought and infantile self-centeredness of the first months of life serve as a state of mind from which wider relationships are developed, as they will be again in adolescence, on a new plane. It is not the infant's fantasy of omnipotence or its love/hate feelings toward its mother, but its movement beyond that duality that is crucial to the successful outcome of adolescence. Graduation from the mother matrix into the larger sphere of a maternal earth matrix in early childhood is the basis for good, concrete object relationships and is also part of the later adolescent graduation exercise into adult status. The wordplay and poetry-mindedness of the adolescent and his new sensitivity to symbolic thought moves him away from the classifications of concrete reality—of animals, plants, weather, rocks, planets, and water—that had been the central tasks of speech in childhood.

Like land birds instinctively setting out on transoceanic migration, given assurance, so to speak, from the experience of the species that there is land on the other side, the human adolescent organism reenters the dangerous ground of im-

mature perception on the premise that society is prepared to meet his psychic demands for a new landing—that is, that society is organized to take these refractory youths through a powerful, tightly structured gestation; to test, teach, reveal; to offer as Erikson says, things worthy of their skill; to tutor their suffering and dreaming; and to guide their feelings of fidelity. If the infancy to which they look for an exemplary protocol of growth has been blighted, or if the adult group is not prepared to administer the new and final birth, then the youths create autistic solutions to their own needs and, prolonging the quest of their adolescence, sink finally, cynically, back into their own incompetent immaturity, like exhausted birds going down at sea.

The scenario created by Western cultures was different, however. The kind of society sought by the Hebrew prophets repudiated the nature-lore parts of a developmental process by which maternal connections are subjectively transferred to the earth, subsequently locking them into the intense idealism of adolescence without the intermediary experience of belonging to Mother Earth. The loss of mother thwarts a middle factor, plunging the individual forever into infantile dualism, without a connecting ground that melts the alternatives of either hating the protective, nourishing She who abandoned him or fixedly adoring the feminine in the guise of his own mother's face, to the detriment of his capacity to establish a mature relationship with the other sex or with any Other. This prolonged, crippling disease of attention and the fantasies of omnipotence as they ripen in adolescent idealism perhaps more than any other traits mark the desert-fringe civilizations.

This faulty developmental scenario separates society from the rhythms of natural life and substitutes a critical posture toward all schematizing. Events erupt into history. There is no preunderstanding in the Hebraic prophetic archetype of fiction, in Attic probing of tragedy, in Socratic isolation, or in

Greek self-scrutiny. In time, art and science became data making instead of tools in myth and ritual. Fictional literature, the art form most peculiar to the descendents of the desert mind, is, says Herbert Schneidau, a defamiliarizing, dissolving solvent that, unlike myth, has a unique plot development, and end, as well as an individual author and point of view. It is, like history, a probe that deconstructs, serving ideology in its verification by conviction.

The one-sided domination of Western cultural style by masculine values is typical of mounted nomadic peoples and was adopted and reformulated by the Hebrew fathers. Their sexual chauvinism is more or less true of the Neolithic as a whole. Even though the sedentary societies of the ancient world (including that side of Hebrew life) were locked in wonder at the powerful mysteries of place and soil, they were politically dominated by males.

The alternatives of male- or female-centered philosophy may seem in our time to be ideological forces to be adjusted by education, but their respective ascendancy waxes and wanes in the psychological development of the child. In traditional tribal peoples, the prepubertal youth is commonly separated from his mother in order to undergo a new birth designed by men, as the first was by women, with the goal of moving the candidate toward a more holistic and polar complementarity between the sexes. It is the theme of this book that the individual is inherently mentally and emotionally tuned to those shifts in focus. The adolescent is prompted by his own intrinsic mood changes to be away from his mother's control. Then everything depends on what the mentors do, for they may, on the historical side, prolong, exaggerate, and make conscious an adult model derived from the pubertal child's tendency to dichotomize the sexes; or they may, on the mythic side, elaborate the separatism temporarily in order to further the purposes of an ultimate integration.²¹ The nov-

ice's initiatory exercises and other educational experiences may strongly influence whether he proceeds psychologically and philosophically to a mature integration. Perhaps society and the individual are more vulnerable to an arrested development fixated on masculinity, rather than on femininity, for two reasons: first, the preoccupation with male forms and fathering is the last of alternated male/female phases before maturity; and, second, the physical domination of all societies by men can mislead the immature-minded into thinking that patriarchal values and ideals are synonymous with universal power.

The task of adolescence is to become whole at a new level of consciousness. The individual is deeply aware of this, though it is not clear to him what that means or how it is to be done. When teachers and counselors take him away from the household, they create the conditions in which the potential adult within him can be realized. But his new circumstances can mislead the individual into thinking that the changes that he feels to be urgent are to be made in the outer world. If in some way (such as the denial of the natural world as a language or the truncation of myth) the overall process is frustrated, the youth may remain stuck in the notion that his ideal can only be achieved by reforming the world.²² Since any number of possible ways of doing that may be imagined, each supported by verbal logic, he is persuaded by his own limited judgment—first by one system of ideas, then another. His compulsion to succeed feeds mainly on his own sense of internal disharmony. Such an ideologist is a poor mentor, as he will perpetuate his own adolescent obsessions and thwarted rites of passage and guide his charges toward ideological choices.²³

Because of his "fight with nature" the man of the desert must strike aggressively, says Watsuki Tetsuro.²⁴ After the model of the herdsman moving his flocks to wherever the

grass is, the Westerner (like all men) enacts his own idea of the sacred in his life. A god, jealous and vengeful, who makes incursions into nature and human affairs is like the Arab herdsman or Assyrian horseman, sweeping things clear, testing his alliances. The fanatical idealist and his cynical alter ego see the world as a stage, fascinated by their self-image.²⁵

To such pseudoequestrians the world is a designed set, says Lapham, speaking of this raiding aspect of our modern society in his essay, "The Melancholy Herd." Democracy is a "pastoral wandering through a department store" where expectations of power and wealth by the Bedouin-like American are like grass greening. Most noteworthy is the short span of attention, a transient-mindedness so dominated by moving on that even the modern city is merely a camp, its inhabitants fixated on change and fear of permanence. The transient mind is dominated by an interior desert of alienation, disappointment, self-hopelessness, and insignificance, for which war, prophecy, and visions are palliative. To those for whom wealth has literally sprung from the earth like milk from a teat, there is at best a poor sense of the cost of things, the value of work or of soil. Politics are like gossip, leadership inseparable from celebrity. The melancholy effect of all this is a hopeless desire for more than the world offers.²⁶

Lapham portrays our aristocratic desert-mindedness as a catalog of childishness, a sort of amalgam of teenybopper frothiness and macho juvenile vapidness clearly not synonymous with the seriousness of the Hebrew desert fathers. They would have been scandalized at our scatterbrained yet patriotic ignorance of history, our dabbling pursuit of entertainment and accumulation of things. Yet the similarity of Americans to mandarin Bedouins is neither accidental nor due to direct cultural heritage. It incorporates that body of adolescent traits and pastoral attitudes first assimilated into Western consciousness by Hebrew prophets and later reworked and

secularized by Greek philosophers and modern Protestants. It is dominated by themes of alienation, disengagement, and unrelatedness—hence chaos.²⁷

It is not my contention that the pubertal child (or, for that matter, the infant in whom the adolescent is immersed retroactively) is himself alienated; the ten-year-old with a moderately good nurturing is happily at home in the world. Gessell describes him in almost beatific terms. In the West, it is the failure of the adolescent's religious mentors in the succeeding four or five years to translate his confidence in people and the earth into a more conscious, more cosmic view, in which he broadens his buoyant faith to include the universe. The amputation of nature myths causes a grievous dislocation, for which he will seek, in true questing spirit, an explanation in terms of "ultimate" reality. He does not become an alienated person until he can give some logic to his flawed relationship to the world. The fiction granted him by the pseudopastoral desert philosophy of the West is that his painful incompleteness is the true mature experience and that the meaninglessness of the natural world is its meaning. In itself, this philosophy is merely inadequate, no worse than other intellectual dead ends. But, acted upon, it wounds us, and we wound the planet. The injury to normal individual development passed on to Western culture by Hebrew ascetics, their puritan emulators, and the Greek demythologizers persists at the root of our assumptions and attitudes about the world. The child's development is not aided by the intellectual masters of the West who control secondary education and are, in their turn, products and arbiters of a desolated adolescent quest.

The central dogma of the West insisted on a separation of spiritual matters from the phenomena of nature. Such a view is sustained not only by formal dogma, but by impairing the orchestrations of the growth of each generation. It is the

philosophical expression of that phase of subadult life when the world seems abruptly altered and decentered, when the purposes of childhood have become irrelevant, and the bindings linking the adolescent as an adult to an awesome and complex new home are not yet perceived. Arrested at that point, denied the methectic workings and mythopoetic vision of man in nature, he will for the rest of his life struggle with existential problems that are normally the work of a few critical years in his second decade of life. I do not mean that the adolescent normally gains instant wisdom, but that the framework of nature as metaphoric foundation for cosmic at-homeness is as native to the human organism in its adolescent years as any nutritive element in the diet.

Lacking it, he will always lack true reverence for the earth. The remaining choices for a logic of creation are an otherworldly orientation, materialist exploitation, or existentialist absurdity. The first calls upon an abstraction that lacks the psychological resources in the concrete, natural, named, and structured world of the juvenile matrix, the foundation for later metaphors, and regresses to the infant's schizoid fears of the loss of the good and bad mother. The second is fixated on juvenile literalness. The last builds its view upon a fragmented, meaningless world like that seen by the blind who are suddenly healed by surgery, like the barren, phenomenal world of the newborn.

In the developmental spiral of epigenesis, the clues to the meaning of things and events in each new matrix are in terms of those of the old. The landscape, for example, is given coherence by the preceding experience of the body and the mother's face, just as face and body had made sense in harmony with the rhythms, tastes, sounds, and cuddled comfort that were predicted by the womb. Biologically, this sequence proceeds to the final commencement, adolescent entry into a world of invisible realities anticipated by and including the

physical terrain, its coherence emerging from the collective meanings that preceded it. Thus the normal regression of the adolescent at the brink of a mature vision revivifies and transforms the three archetypes—womb, body-face, and natural world. Each will in some way be available as images and reenactments by which his particular culture portrays the universe.

In Western pseudopastoralism, however, the desert is no place; nature is a limbo (to the later puritans an evil snare). This view devastates the child's organizing work in two directions: it tends to diminish the potential of his understanding of social relationships by excluding the tangible nuances of events in nature that, by analogy, enrich early familial experience; and it sheds no symbolic light on the larger cosmos. The beneficiaries of eye surgery are usually subject to intense anxiety; the longer they have been blind, the more likely they are to abandon the pursuit of visual meaning and lapse into knowing by sound and touch.²⁸ Crawling babies explore the natural world joyously and fruitfully only if their mothers are reassuring and encouraging. If their mothers are overcautious and anxious, the child becomes fixated on the mother's emotion, reflects her fear and uncertainty, and instead of organizing a new matrix in the land, mechanically adopts the mother's fearful attitudes.²⁹

The broken sequence of mental growth fostered by the fathers of the West cannot be represented simply as a bad link in an otherwise healthy chain. Unreconstructed adolescents make bad mothers and bad fathers. The parent whose oversimplified view of things places the natural world on a lower plane or in opposition to the social world will express this anxious, schizoid attitude in many ways to his children and will fail to make occasions for their own healthy growth beyond it. Humans intuitively see analogies between the concrete world out there and their own inner world. If they con-

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ceive the former as a chaos of anarchic forces or as dead and frozen, then so will they perceive their own bodies and society; so will they think and act on that assumption and vindicate their own ideas by altering the world to fit them; and so will they rear their children.